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C O N F I D E N T I A L RIYADH 000357

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT PLEASE PASS TO G/IWI; NEA/ARP FOR JOSH HARRIS;
DRL/NESCA FOR MATT HICKEY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/18/2019
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KWMN](#) [KPAO](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: IS THIS THE YEAR SAUDI WOMEN DRIVE?

REF: A. RIYADH 00233
[B](#). RIYADH 02024

Classified By: Political Counselor Lisa M. Carle
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#). KEY POINTS

-- (U) A senior Saudi government official has once again raised the possibility that Saudi Arabia will lift the ban on women driving, perhaps as early as this summer.

-- (C) The government has not acted on similar statements in the past (ref A, B), and no evidence exists to suggest an imminent lifting of the ban on women driving.

-- (C) A 1991 fatwa, or religious decree, prohibits women from driving in Saudi Arabia. Bureaucratic and practical obstacles exist, but the chief barrier is cultural; many Saudis, male and female, remain uncomfortable with the social independence driving could bring for Saudi women.

[2](#). COMMENT

-- (C) Any decision to allow women to drive will be made by King Abdullah, when and if he judges that Saudi society is ready to accept such a major change. The recent announcement could be yet another trial balloon to help gauge society's readiness. In this sense, it is noteworthy that the statement was made to a foreign newspaper, and reported second-hand in the Saudi press. Lifting the ban would be consistent with King Abdullah's policy of incremental reform. However, past statements by the King and other high ranking officials have positioned the issue as social, rather than political or legal, implying that the government would follow the will of the people.

-- (C) There has been little printed public opposition to this latest announcement but much verbal debate about the pros and cons of the ban and to what extent, or under what circumstances, women should be permitted to drive. Such open discussion could indicate greater acceptance of the idea, but there are no public opinion polls to verify this.

END KEY POINTS & COMMENT.

BACKGROUND

[3](#). (U) READY TO ROLL?: In a January 21 statement to the UK's Daily Telegraph, Saudi Deputy Information Minister Abdulaziz bin Salamah stated, "There has been a decision to move on this (women drivers) by the Royal Court because it is recognized that if girls have been in schools since the 1960s, they have a capability to function behind the wheel

when they grow up.... We will make the announcement soon." He added, "In terms of women driving, we don't have it now because of the reticence of some segments of society."

¶4. (U) SOURCE OF THE BAN: The ban on women driving dates from a 1991 fatwa issued by the late Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia Sheik Abdulaziz bin Baz. The Grand Mufti claimed that allowing women to drive would result in public "mixing" of men and women, put women into dangerous situations because they could be alone in cars, and therefore result in social chaos. The fatwa has the force of law and would need to be rescinded through another fatwa from the current Grand Mufti.

¶5. (U) WOMEN DRIVE ANYWAY: There are, in fact, many instances in which Saudi women defy the prohibition. Women drive on private property such as desert farms or residential compounds beyond reach of police. Embassy contacts and media report that in rural areas women routinely drive out of necessity, without being stopped. Al-Hayat Newspaper reported February 16 that ten people had been injured in an accident involving a female driver in a rural village but added "a woman driving in some Saudi villages is considered normal." Several prominent princesses have spoken out against the ban, including both Princess Lolwah Al-Faisal (daughter of the late King Faisal) and Princess Amira Al-Taweel (wife of Saudi business tycoon Al-Waleed bin Talal). Princess Al-Taweel told the Associated Press on February 9 that she drives when overseas and, like many women, prefers to drive herself instead of "being with a driver who is not related to me." An Arab News article on January 7 reported that 1,354 Saudi women have obtained drivers licenses in Bahrain in the past year.

¶6. (U) LET THE PEOPLE DECIDE? The King and other Saudi officials suggest that they favor allowing women to drive but are reluctant to get ahead of public opinion. For example, in a February 2007 interview the king said, "The decision of women driving is a social decision and the role of the government is to provide the suitable atmosphere for it." Similarly, Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal stated in a November 2007 television interview, "My point of view is that women have the right to drive, but we are not the side who decides that - the families should decide. For us, this is not a political issue but a social issue that is something that people should decide on rather than the government."

A BRIDGE TOO FAR?

¶7. (U) LOGISTICS: Saudi officials and other contacts often cite the so-called practical problems that allowing women to drive would pose. They say that Saudi authorities would need to make certain accommodations in traffic law enforcement, such as deploying female traffic police (women are not currently part of the police forces) or separate facilities in jails for women. Women would most likely need to remove their face coverings to be able to see to drive, and expose their faces to unrelated males, something many women resist. Even if there were female traffic police, there would be no way to ensure their availability each time a female motorist committed a violation or needed assistance. Likewise, female drivers would likely be forced to interact with male tow truck operators or gas station attendants. Men caught running red lights in Riyadh spend one night in a local police station. While there are female prisons, most local police stations have no separate facilities in which to detain women (currently, women stopped for driving are not detained but returned to a male guardian). Issues relating to traffic offenses and accidents are dealt with at local government offices that do not accommodate women in areas separate from men.

¶8. (C) "MIXED" FEELINGS: One contact quoted a Saudi woman as saying "Why would I want to drive when I already have a driver? Driving would be an annoyance, not an advantage." Some women also express fear of harassment if found driving alone. Still other contacts counter that many Saudi families

simply cannot afford to hire drivers, and in a country where cities have little public transportation, they argue that benefits of mobility would outweigh social risks. Some male contacts argue that, without the financial means to buy a car and hire a driver for female family members, the current system puts great strain on males forced to taxi female family members wherever they go. This practice causes time loss at work, or confines female family members to their homes. Some males also support lifting of ban because they oppose having a non-relative male driver in the car with females.

19. (C) BACKING INTO IT? Many observers predict that the dilemma will be solved with a gradual, step-by-step approach. Rather than announcing a change, local authorities may simply begin accepting applications from certain classes of female drivers (for example, married women above a certain age) in certain areas of the country. The issue clearly provokes strong feelings and is one on which the government remains cautious.
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